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THE "CANON" AND THE "LUBOK" IN BURYAT THANGKA PAINTING

Unique monuments of Buryat Buddhist art,as highly important source, are extremely valuable for humanities scholarship. Today,the scholarship in our country is actively filling the informational vacuum in Buddhist research in Russia created by the years of the fight against religion led by Soviet authorities. The funds of Russian museum contain extremely rare Buddhist materials which are still far from fully researched. The reason of this lies in various problems in the research of Buddhist heritage — for example, particular complexity of Buddhist art, anonymity of authors, the lack of museum specialists expert in Tibetan and Old Mongolian languages, etc. As a result, time is ripe for further research of Buddhist collections preserved in Russian museum. The goal of this work is to analyze and compare canonic and lubok traditions in Buryat Buddhist painting.

The National Museum of the Republic of Buryatia possesses vast collection of Buddhist culture and art, whose value and uniqueness become more and more important every year. It contains more than 3000 paintings of Tibetan, Chinese, Mongolian and Buryat masters. Of particular interest is a collection of Buryat Buddhist painting, since this is the less studied of museum collections which still remains the object of primary research, preliminary chronological evaluation, periodization, attributing to different schools, their stylistic features, canon and lubok traditions and so on. The works of Buryat thangka painters are of great research value, as a factual basis for studying the Buddhist art of Buryatia.

When talking about Buddhist painting, it should be noted that it fully follows the strict canons of proportions and a strictly determined system. Canonic traditions of Buryat Buddhist paining descend from the Tantric art of Tibet. Tibetan art theory, in turn, is rooted in the general Indian tradition, in ancient Indian treatises on art and sculpture: *Pratima Lakshana*, or *Shariputra* sutra, *Chitralakshana*; *Samvara*, *Kalachakra*, Black and Red *Yamantaka* tantras. These treatises were reworked and supplied with comments in Tibet, and then canonized in sacred texts of *Ganzhura* and *Danzhura*.

In Indian and Buddhist treatises the concept of "canon" has multiple meanings. Canon is a philosophical and an aesthetic concept which includes ethical, ontological, cosmogonic, socio-political and other notions; it is also a theoretical and abstract qualitative principle of modeling the iconographic image in a concrete work of art. Canon, as a principle, took shape

in the works of art as visually embodied in lines, volumes, colors, color combinations, rhythm of compositional organization of space on surface [Gerasimova, p. 290–291].

According to canon, the huge pantheon of Buddhist deities was constructed following strict, logically justified hierarchic staircase. The canon prescribes proportions for each class of deities, as well as the strict system of images – for example, *dashatala* system for Buddhas and Boddhisattvas (i. e., the system of ten palms, *Bur.* arban algatan), *ashtatala* system for lower deities (the system of 6–8palms, *Bur.* zurgan-nayman algatan). The image of every deity is also described in detail: their poses, the number of arms and legs, gestures, attributes, color, form and space. The treatises specify that an artwork can be beautiful, holy and blessed only if it complies with canons, i. e. it has correct: 1) bodily proportions; 2) beauty and harmony; 3) emotional expressiveness. In Buddhist painting, canon determines the subject of the work, its composition and color scheme, the goal of which was mainly the depiction of inner spiritual vision [Dondokov, p. 180–182].

Canonical treatises also specified how an artist should approach thangka painting. For thangka painters, creation of thangkas is a magical doing, a kind of divine worship which carries sacred meaning. According to the adepts of Buddhist church, Buddhist thangka occupies intermediary position between the world of sensory forms, and a formless absolute; it is a mean and a zone of communication and interaction between these worlds. "Thangka is not just an object of contemplation – it is also a specifically codified program of meditative practice". Its primary and highest goal is to serve as means of communication between humans and deities in the context of religious ritual [Gerasimova, p. 302–303]. Therefore, improperly painted thangkas should have been destroyed immediately, so that they could not prevent a meditating person from reaching their goals. As a result, thangka painters were judged according to high standards; it was forbidden to create holy images without spiritual initiation. An artist had to belong to the class of lamas, and had to be initiated in a special ritual. The study of canons was an indispensable part of education of Buddhist lamas-thangka painters. The artists studied for many years before they themselves began to paint divine images [Sanzhi-Tsybik Tsybikov, p. 5–7].

Buryat painting required a relatively long time to absorb Buddhist canons and creatively apply them as part of local pictorial traditions [Goboyeva, p. 39–40].

The earliest Buryat works in the collection belong to the II half of XVIII century – this is the period which saw the beginning of development of Buryat thangka painting. At first, the canons of Buddhist art arrived in Buryatia not so much through literary tradition, but rather through the tradition of skills, techniques and typical patterns of visual arts – i. e., through the practice of copying Tibetan and Mongolian ritual works

[Gerasimova, 305]. Buryat artists started to work using available examples, complete thangkas brought by Tibetan and Mongolian lamas, or woodcut prints (*Bur.* bar).

These are small size thangkas, because they were intended for use in lamaist joss houses housed in felt yurts. Only in the beginning of XIX century the last nomadic temples disappeared, and the monasteries became stationary structures located in small wooden buildings [Ibid., p. 245]. An average size of early thangkas in the museum collection is about 40 × 30 cm. At the same time, there are several rather large works — for example, *Virupaksha* thangka depicting one of four maharajas, keeper of the West. Its size is 102,5 × 60 cm. This work can be dated by the beginning of XIX century — the period when the first wooden datsan appeared, as well as the opportunity to paint large thangkas.

Iconographic subjects of old thangkas are not sophisticated: they are limited to the depiction of those temple and everyday deities which were known to the wide majority of worshippers. These are mostly representations of the images of peaceful merciful deities, givers of wisdom, knowledge, offsprings, longevity, prosperity — Buddha Shakyamuni with two disciples, Amitabha, Amitayus, White Tara and so on; as well as the images of wrathful deities — Palden Lhamo, Vajrapani, Yamaraja and others. The images of highest ranking esoteric deities of Tantric pantheon are not yet present, as well as hagiographical series [Ibid., p. 246].

Studying old thangkas in museum collection, we can see that the realization of the canon within ritual art depended on the historical background of the artistic tradition within ethnic context in which external form of religious ritual took shape. Professional art as such did not exist in Buryatia. However, as any other people on our planet, Buryats had their own rudimental art which was limited by its function as decoration of surrounding objects. In everyday life, Buryat masters, whether blacksmiths or carpenters, realized their aesthetical notions by decorating folk costumes, commonly used objects and dwellings [Soktoyeva, p. 19]. Therefore, there were also prerequisites for original stylistic features which mostly expressed themselves in color, form and composition. The colors most often used and loved by Buryats were blue, yellow, brown, red etc. Compositions were simple and laconic. These characteristic features were transferred into early Buryat Buddhist thangkas.

Consequently, old Buryat artworks from the museum collection are characterized by ideal simplicity, succinctness of composition, lack of decorative and ornamental overwork on central image, and absence of secondary details. Landscape background is characterized by unusual depiction of hills, trees, waves, clouds which lack even a hint of Chinese manner. These thangkas are made by using a limited set of linear stencils, but the color schemes of initial standard composition allows for a multitude of unique variations, surprising in their delicate and sophisticated

picturesqueness, the variety of color combinations, the exquisite nobleness of muted color schemes achieved by subtle transitions from halftones to more intense colors, the freedom and originality of artistic exploration.

Some examples of the earliest old thangkas are characterized by the fresco quality which was created by using local earth paints which gave soft, opaque, mixed color, and a special primed canvas [Gerasimova, p. 246]. Old thangkas typically use rough loosely woven canvas, coarsely woven fabrics similar to modern sackcloth and a painstakingly thorough ground work — as a result, the primed canvas looks like well-dressed leather.

Initial canon norms were subject to folk interpretation, sometimes quite removed from canonic demands of Indian Buddhist iconography. At the first stage of the development of professional painting, Buryat artists — even though they painted standard *bar* imprints on cotton canvas — created original works of art characterized by wonderful simplicity, spontaneity of emotional attitude, and artless naiveté. Such freedom of artistic work and distinctive originality determined by the folk understanding of beauty were possible only at first stages of development of lamaism in Buryatia, when, firstly, local thangka painters were, for the most part, talented self-taught non-professionals who copied thangka stencils without any specialized understanding of canon; secondly, there was no strict church control over their work [Ibid., p. 308].

By the second half of XIX century, Buryat painting canon becomes more sophisticated. This happened as a result of expanding connections with the Buddhist centers of neighboring countries: Tibet, China, Mongolia etc. Buryat thangka painters began to study different manners and styles of leading foreign schools; they mastered all changes in external and internal form of thangka painting; they received specialized education and tantric artistic initiation [Ibid., p. 247].

Buryat thangkas of transitional period are characterized by more complex themes and subjects, bright ornamentality, technical sophistication, as well as by the appearance of some elements borrowed from Chinese well-wishing symbolism.

Chinese symbols were originally used in thangkas as ritual gifts to deities. These are: the cloud of happiness, the stone percussion instrument *qing* (homonymous with the word "happiness"), jasper ornaments (*fangsheng* or *yuansheng*), book or picture scrolls, copper coins with a rectangular hole in the middle (*choh*), symbols of silver ingots (*yunbao* or *ding*), *zhui* (literally, according to a wish) — a curved staff which was gifted as a symbol of happiness, well-being and the fulfillment of all wishes. Apart from this, Chinese elements appear on Buryat thangkas as secondary details: elements of clothing, attributes, ornaments and so on. For example, the deities Pehar, Zhamsaran, Dalha, Dayan Derhe (the latter came from shamanist mythological pantheon of Mongols and Buryats and later was included in the Buddhist pantheon of this region) and

Maharaja are depicted wearing clothes which resemble, in certain details, the costumes of ancient Chinese generals: jagged fan-shaped elements decorating helmets, armor, upper short or long wavy breeches, lower trousers with suspenders; the flags fastened behind their shoulders and visible over their heads. The head of Sagaan Ubgen's (The White Elder) staff had a form of *zhui* on Buryat thangkas. Also, in many depictions of Namsaray, the god of wealth, as well as the White Elder, the curled boots noses had the same shape [Gomboyeva, p. 39–40].

At this period, Tibetan Nartan stencils of serial thangkas became widespread in thangka painting – reincarnations of Buddha, reincarnations of Panchen Lamas and Dalai Lamas, reincarnations of Tsongkhapa, Milarayba, and eighty-four mahasiddhas. Hagiographical thangkas appear: fifteen miracles of Buddha, twelve deeds of Buddha, sixteen or eighteen arhats, etc. However, the assimilation of these stereotypical serial thangka standards from famous religious centers continued mostly by way of copying, and not an original development, an initiative which ordinary artists could not afford.

We see the development of professional background – Buryat thangka painters begin to acquire new painting techniques, gilding technique, miniature and so on. The artists become technically more sophisticated and masterful. But, as tibetologist scholar K. M. Gerasimova notes, this time also produced a line of degradation. "A certain part of thangka painters turned to mechanical copying of accepted examples of the 'high style'. Technical skill became primary features – accuracy of following the canon, fine artwork, abundant gilding, miniature ornamental finishing – but all these formal masterful luster could not mask the inner emptiness and coldness; often even the lack of artistic taste. Nowhere can we find the erstwhile sincerity, freedom and originality. The copying of model examples of Tibetan and Mongolian monastery workshops improved professional level, but shackled the artists' creative initiative" [Ibid., p. 247].

The turn of the XX century is a time when Buryat Buddhist art flourishes, producing original, highly distinctive and unique artworks. In its best examples, late Buryat thangkas is characterized by the high plasticity of drawing, the expressiveness of light and color, dynamism, as well as the exploration of the problem of movement. By this time, Buryatia witnessed the rise of local Buryat Buddhist art with its own school, traditions and artistic style. In this period, thangka painters try to go beyond the Buddhist canon; they widen their horizons and become interested in characteristics of Western artistic system – modeling of volumes by illumination in painting, representation of realistic images, as well as space and perspective. They boldly introduce new motives and subjects, try to modernize medieval stencils by using heightened expression of central thangka images, realistic depiction of secondary elements, landscape background, etc. [Ibid., p. 249].

This is exemplified by unique thangkas depicting Sagaan Ubgen, from the museum collection. The greatest locally worshipped deity, Sagaan Ubgen, was very popular among Buryat artists, since his thangkas had a certain amount of liberty in composition and artistic design, and provided the masters with an opportunity for creative expression. The thangka painted in 1927 by Tsyrempil Ayusheev from Khorinsky aymak shows the White Elder as an ordinary old man standing at the river bank, holding a staff and a string of beads. The thangka's landscape is close to realistic landscape. At the foreground, there is a river flowing into the distance; far away mountains and trees are visible. There are deer coming to the watering place; the swans float down the river. His works are characterized by subtle and well-made depictions of nature; the illumination is made in soft, muted colors.

While the professional level of Buddhist thangka painters grew, and they created works of high artistic merit, among ordinary lay people became popular thangkas which were commonly known as *huazhin zurag* ("huazhin" drawing in Buryat language) which were painted not by lamas-thangka painters, but by amateur Chinese artists, and were stylized as Chinese lubok *nianhua* pictures (New Year pictures). This type of folk art became widespread in China at the end of XIX century.

The majority of researches agree that the origins of *nianhua* can be found in Buddhist ritual art — production of paper thangkas depicting Buddhist deities and texts of prayers already existed during the Tang dynasty (618–907).

The term *nianhua* came into use only in 1920–1930s. Before this, they had different names in different Chinese regions, for example: *wei-hua* ("Tianjin pictures", Wei being one of the names of the city of Tianjin), *huanle tu* ("diverting pictures"), hua zhang ("picture sheets"), huar ("pictures"). [Kravtsova, p. 656–667]. The common Buryat name of thangkas made by Chinese amateur artists — *huanzhin zurag* — is probably derived from the name *hua zhang*, although in Buryaia we don't have verifiable information about the origins of this name. But it is certain that these works were heavily criticized and often even destroyed.

Such works feature quite prominently in the museum collection; they are usually dated by the end of XIX — beginning of XX century. The iconography of depicted Buddhist deities is fairly diverse. There are buddhas, bodhisattvas, higher Tantric idams, dharmapalas, locally worshipped deities. Therefore, it can be said that Chines artists were quite good copyists and, if commissioned, could paint any deity. But the quality of work was not always on par, although the collection features works identified as "huazhin zurag", which are painted very professionally.

Iconographic canon is almost always observed; however, iconometric canon is quite often painted with errors. Bodily proportions, arms and legs positions, attributes and symbols do not comply with the canon. The most

distinctive feature of the works made by Chinese wandering artists is their thangkas' color range. These works are characterized by intense colors — ultramarine blue, bright pink and so on.

According to canon, such works should have been destroyed, but they were inexpensive and were commissioned by lay people, for home altars as protector deities and for the performance of rituals. The works of "professional" thangka painters were expensive, since their creation was a very long and laborious process. Only rich enough people could afford to buy such thangkas.

In 1930s, with the beginning of anti-religious persecutions, most of thangkas were destroyed — only some of them survived in private possessions or in museum collections. These thangkas are important historically, since thanks to them we can surmise which deities were most popular among common people.

To summarize, the collection of the National Museum of the Republic of Buryatia contains thangkas painted according to canons, as well as lubok thangkas commissioned by lay people. In the first case, these thangkas were made by Buryat lamas-thangka painters, in the second — by Chinese artisan painters. But all of them possess historical value, as the evidence of origins and development of Buryat Buddhist painting.

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